



Group aims to clarify standards, enhance timelines for adoption

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Q. What were the work group's findings?

A. We didn't have real clear standards in place. There was not a timeline of events so that all users - parents, attorneys and adoption agencies - would know how long the adoption would take. The fact that we couldn't say how long an adoption would take was something we wanted to change. Our goal was to enhance our timeliness, efficiency and handling of cases from the time a petition is filed until the adoption is completed.

Q. How did this affect adoption cases?

A. Cases were lingering because people didn't know what was needed or what was required of them. In a lot of instances, cases were delayed because people had not completed their paperwork. Now, they can have all their paperwork together before they come to court. So, when they get to court, it's pretty smooth sailing.

Q. What did the work group do to ensure this?

A. We developed an updated checklist of everything that's required to be filed in any kind of adoption. To let people know what to expect, our systems manager posted the checklist on the (Washtenaw County Trial Court) Web site and links to every form required and a full description of the process. (Those without Internet access can receive the checklist by calling the Juvenile Court.)

Q. How long does the court expect adoptions to take now?

A. We expect family adoptions to be completed in 125 days (or four months) from the day a petition is filed to the day the adoption is completed. For international adoptions, it's about 10 months. There's often a slight delay because the paperwork needs to be signed by the court to bring a child into the country. For the majority of adoption agency cases, there is a standard, six-month supervisory

period. During this time, the agency visits the child and the family. These are expected to be completed in nine months. Sometimes with permanent wards (children whose parents had their parental rights terminated), if they've been in a home for one year, the agency can waive the supervisory period because they've already been visiting the home while the children were in foster care. In these cases, we expect it to take 45 days.

Q. Are there times when adoptions take longer?

A. Yes. There are unique situations in adoptions. For instance, if a child is Native American, we need to notify the Native American tribe because they have a right to intercede. In a few instances, when birth parents lived in other countries, we needed to translate documents and send them back and forth to those countries.

Q. How is the new process working?

A. At the end of September, we were meeting the standard 83 percent of the time.

Q. How many adoption cases did the court handle over the last year?

A. There were 244 cases filed in 2002: 81 cases, or 33 percent, were children brought into new families because their birth parents' parental rights were terminated because of abuse or neglect; 69 cases, or 28 percent, were agency petitions, either international or direct consent (when a birth family or an agency chooses the adoptive families). The remaining 94 cases, or 39 percent, were relative, guardian or stepparent adoptions. This year, the number of cases filed have been significantly lower than last year. Through September, only 79 cases were filed. I can't say why that is, but people that I've talked to across Michigan are saying the same thing.

Q. What's Michigan Adoption Day?

A. The state Supreme Court and the (Family Independence Agency) proclaimed Nov. 25 as Michigan Adoption Day to draw attention to the importance of adoption, to celebrate adoptive families, and to educate the public about adoption. What Washtenaw County is doing is finalizing plans to have 20 adoptions that day and we'll hold a luncheon celebration for those families and other families who have had adoptions over the past year. This will happen in the (Washtenaw County) courthouse (in downtown Ann Arbor).

Q. Does the court provide other services?

A. Yes. We have post-adoption services. That's when adult adoptees (18 years old and over) seek information about their birth families. Adoption records are sealed and can only be opened by a judge's order.

Both birth parents and adoptees who want to search for their birth parents and siblings, can file a form with the Family Independence Agency's Central Adoption

Registry either giving consent or denial to giving out non-identifying information (like the background of the birth family, the health of the child at the time of the adoption) to those looking for them. If there's nothing on file with the FIA, they can ask a judge if they can hire a confidential intermediary.

Q. What's a confidential intermediary?

A. That's someone who's trained in adoption issues and will do the actual searching for the birth parents and siblings. The intermediary will make an initial contact to see if the person they're searching for wants to be contacted. Our court has a contract with a confidential intermediary who makes sure people understand what to expect, just in case the people they're searching for don't want to be contacted.

Q. What else does the court do to help people in the adoption and post-adoption process?

A. It's important for us to recognize that adoption is a really anxious time for families. Even if things are going smoothly with the process, people are worried. They haven't been involved in a court process and they don't know what to expect. We do a lot of listening and answering questions and hand-holding through the process.

To view guidelines and forms to file an adoption case in Washtenaw County on the web, go to www.co.washtenaw.mi.us/DEPTS/

COURTS/INDEX.HTM or call the Washtenaw County Juvenile Court Center at 734-222-6900.

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